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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN GOVERNORS' CONFERENCE FOCUSES ON SECURITY
AND NEED TO EXTEND REACH OF CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Classified By: A/POLITICAL COUNSELOR MARIE RICHARDS FOR REASONS
1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary. On 28 Dec, the Governors and Police Chiefs of Kandahar, Zabul and Helmand provinces met with key Regional Command (RC) South commanders and staff. Security dominated the agenda. Many Taliban are migrating to Pakistan for the winter but RC South and the governors all want to keep up operations during the winter against those remaining. All realized the importance of reaching out to the population and trying to get them to support the government.

Background

12. (U) Afghan attendees included Kandahar Governor Assadullah Khalid, Zabul Governor Dilber Arman, and Engineer Daoud, who has been Helmand Governor for several weeks. Also attending were the three provincial police chiefs and Gen Rauffy, the new ANA 205th Corps commander. Coalition members present included key RC South US commanders and staff, plus Romanian, Canadian, and British representatives.

13. (U) The four items on the agenda consisted of Security, the new Provincial Councils (PC), Cross-Provincial Coordination, and the Taliban reconciliation program known as Peace Through Strength (PTS). While most of the entire conference focused on security, in his welcoming remarks the RC South commander stated that the PCs were bringing real democracy to Afghanistan, as these council members were the people who would actually deal with and answer to constituents. He also said that many Taliban are tired, and would be willing to give up, if PTS enabled them to do so with dignity.

Zabul Province

14. (S) For each province, RC South S-2 (Intelligence) officers briefed their assessment, followed by the governor and police chief. For Zabul Province, S-2 expected the four northern districts to remain the most active during the winter, and that activity in the central and southern districts would slack off. The winter this year will probably not be as severe as last year, which was unusually severe. The Afghan National Army (ANA) and Coalition Forces (CF) will work to keep the Ring Road open, as well as guarding key points on the road linking the Ring Road to the Pakistani border near Zanjshir. Another objective is increased sustainment capability for the ANA. In addition to military operations, the CF will maintain a presence all throughout the province over the winter, including such activities as Village Medical Outreaches (VMOs) and food and fuel distribution.

15. (S) Chief Nabi (who is both the Zabul Police Chief and also the Afghan Highway Patrol (AHP) commander for the region from Kandahar to Ghazni) followed, saying that security is much better than last year, with the enemy divided into small groups. He noted that recently there had been attacks on checkpoints along the Ring Road in Sheri Safa, rather than Shajoy, where the Taliban normally traverse the Ring Road en route from Pakistan to northern Zabul. The Chief said he wanted to go on the offensive with small missions throughout the district this winter, if the CF could provide air support (both for firepower and rapid transport mobility). While agreeing that about 50 percent of Taliban forces would leave Zabul for Pakistan over the winter, he believed those remaining were under pressure to conduct operations, not just rest and hide. He concluded by noting the need for popular support out in the districts and also

noting that 80 percent of Zabul,s population is poor, and the best solution is to give them a way to support their families.

16. (U) Zabul Governor Arman agreed with the last point, stating that the government was not effective in getting out the word and winning hearts and minds in the countryside. He noted that when he briefed shuras at remote villages that the GoA was an Islamic government, and that President Karzai represented all the people of Afghanistan, the people had not realized that before. He also lamented that the government could not provide security to each village to protect them from Taliban revenge or violence.

Kandahar Province

17. (C) Gov Asadullah Khalid warned that not all villagers were honest with the government and CF. He favored ambushing the Taliban when they go to villages, and also supports more use of psychological operations and propaganda. He had no answer as to how the government could guard each village, the key issue Governor Arman had raised.

18. (C) For Kandahar, Chief Waheedi stressed the importance of hiring local ANP officers from their own villages. Gov Khalid, like Gov Arman, stressed the importance of visiting the districts and having meet and greets between the villagers and the Governor, Chief of Police, and ANA corps commander. RC South commander noted that the winter would be a good time to try to win popular support, during a period of Taliban minimum manning. He also noted a big Village Medical Outreach program in mid-January for the northern districts of Kandahar Province.

Helmand Province

19. (C) The objective in Helmand is to try to disrupt movement of the Taliban as they transit to their sanctuaries in Oruzgan and northern Kandahar Provinces. The Taliban use smuggling and narcotics routes from Pakistan and exploit Baluch tribal issues. Governor Daoud noted that Helmand has problems similar to the other two provinces. It has a 100-mile long border with Pakistan, where the Taliban is strong, and one district has 19 cross-border routes in it.

10. (S) Governor Daoud estimated that there are about 450 Taliban in Helmand, distributed among 53 groups or cells, and that they are better equipped and funded than government forces in the province, where the ANA and ANP are almost non-existent. He believes the population is neither pro-government nor pro-Taliban. He further claimed that the Taliban promise protection against government poppy eradication efforts, and that the Taliban in Helmand are well-funded with money from narco-traffickers and smugglers.

11. (C) He claimed that when he assumed office several weeks ago, the Taliban had managed to close 50 percent of the schools in the province. One of his goals is to keep the education system open, he said, as it would be much harder to re-open it if the Taliban manage to close down all schools in the province.

12. (C) Governor Daoud said he has talked to many people in Helmand since taking office, and he feels most are optimistic, but that they have no power to support the government. He proposed moving forward by cutting the number of ANP in the province to the number who are loyal to the government and willing to oppose the Taliban and the more numerous smugglers, both of whom are the enemy. He estimated the number of reliable policemen to be about 1,200 - claiming that 50 percent of the ANP now are escorting drug traffickers. He also said that while some ANP officers are completely bad, but some just need training. In some villages with ineffective ANP units, he has helped them develop unofficial village protection forces.

13. (C) He continued by saying that Helmand has lots of tribal issues, that some tribes feel neglected by the government, and that some districts are virtually run by the Taliban. He would like to have the forces to attack Taliban cells and close up or tighten the currently open border with Pakistan. For that, he would like air support (firepower and transport) from the CF. He opined that if it were a cold winter, many Taliban may migrate from Helmand to Kandahar and Zabul.

ANA Perspective

14. (U) The new ANA 205th Corps commander agreed with the governors that there is a huge gap between the government and the population.

15. (S) From a military perspective, he also wanted to press the enemy during the winter, so that they would be weaker when they regrouped in the spring. He was in favor of Chief Nabi's recommendation of patrolling and setting up ambushes, and taking advantage of air transport and firepower. He noted his forces were spread out and not very mobile. He needs a third brigade but thinks that will take about three more months (the RC South commander recommended he push the government to staff it up sooner).

Reconciliation Program

16. (C) Gov Daoud was more enthusiastic about PTS than the other governors. He felt it could be effective if the enemy was weakened first, and the program were publicized in all of the districts. He claimed that PTS was forcing Pakistan to recruit and train foreigners for the Taliban, and that only 10 percent of the Taliban members today were former Taliban members. He cited additional statistics that out of 400 prisoners released under PTS, only about 2 percent had gone back to the enemy. He also stressed the importance of family and village vetting in the screening process. He urged the CF to work more with the governors and local officials, when arresting people and in trying to determine where CF prisoners really are from.

Kandahar Governor's Initiatives

17. (C) The agenda item of cross-province coordination was not formally discussed, but some coordination did take place. Governor Khalid discussed some issues with the other governors on the margins, then raised them formally at the conference. He said they all agreed they were facing a guerrilla war and needed air support. He proposed a tri-province Quick Reaction Force (QRF) in addition to the provincial ones already in existence. He envisioned them traveling out somewhere for a week or so and setting up ambushes. The ambushes would weaken the enemy, and rumors of ambushes would hopefully be a deterrent, he said. Governor Daoud added that it would be better to use helicopters than trucks for operations, as there would be better operational security and the troops would be less open to attack when returning to base after their ambush operations. RC South commander noted that such a force already existed and was trained, but he and his staff noted some technical problems that would have to be worked out. Governor Khalid said if the CF would agree to provide the helicopter support, the governors would do the rest of the planning. There were several lively, side-bar discussions among the Afghan participants.

18. (C) Governor Khalid also proposed that the three regional governors and their police chiefs meet in Kabul with President Karzai, the Minister of the Interior, the Minister of Defense, Ambassador Neumann and LTG Eikenberry to push for a third ANA brigade to be deployed here as soon as possible, due to the Taliban threat. The governor claimed the central government would forget about them unless they constantly reminded it about the needs of the southeast provinces. He also lamented that the ministers in Kabul do not visit the provinces, even large ones like Kandahar. The governors felt the best timeframe for such a meeting would be after the London Conference next month, which the government is currently focused on.

19. (C) The governor also raised narcotics. He claimed the earlier eradication had been too early in the season. He said believed growers in Helmand and Uruzgan were waiting to see what would happen in Kandahar, and that he proposed a serious eradication effort this year. He proposed mainly using ANA and ANP but asked what indirect support the US could provide. The ANA commander replied the MoD had directed him not to participate in poppy eradication, although the Helmand governor responded that the Taliban and drugs are tied together.

Bring Provincial Council Members to Shuras

120. (U) Due to the length of time spent on security, there was no time to discuss the Provincial Councils. However, in his closing remarks, the RC South commander stressed their importance to the new Afghan democracy, as they are the people who connect the government to the local citizens. He strongly urged the governors to have the local PC member present when they conduct shuras out in their districts.

Conference Atmospherics And Dynamics

121. (C) These regional conferences have been held roughly once a quarter, at different venues. The advantages of having them at the Governor's Compound are having the Afghans in front and the CF more in the background, and demonstrating the Afghans' ability to host a secure conference at a civilian compound. The disadvantage is that there are too many attendees, and too much time is usually spent making speeches for the benefit of the press and the other attendees. In contrast, this conference was very business-like and the discussions remained focused. While each governor had some points he wanted to make about his province, there was no posturing or long-winded speeches. Also, without the press and other attendees, they were able to be more candid and open in discussing just how little reach the government has out into the districts.

122. (U) One positive development is that the governors are showing more initiative and taking ownership of these conferences. In August, the S-2 followed the same format of briefing their assessment by province, then asking for input and feedback from the governors. There was very little feedback. The RC South staff set the agenda and pretty much ran the conference while the governors were mostly passive (except for making speeches). By contrast, the governors and CoPs at this conference actively participated and initiated discussions on a number of points (to the extent that the agenda could not be finished).

123. (U) One constant is that Kandahar (and therefore its governor), remains preeminent in this region. Using a state analogy in terms of population and economic development and importance, Kandahar would be like New York or California, Zabul like West Virginia or Mississippi, and Helmand perhaps like Montana (or the old &wild west.8).

Assessments of the Governors

124. (C) Gov Arman: The Qalat PRT and TR Rock think very highly of the governor, both for his honesty and strong leadership abilities.

125. (C) Gov Khalid: He is young (about 35) and very dynamic. However, he lacks on follow-through of his ideas. He hosted a major anti-narcotics shura, with much publicity, in late September, but then did nothing to follow through on it. Thus, RC South is skeptical of him following through on the initiatives he proposed during this conference.

126. (C) Gov Daoud: The PRT's first impressions are very positive, and they are glad he has replaced the former governor. The PRT commander noted that Gov Daoud spent quite a bit of time preparing for this conference, and seems willing to seriously attack the drug problem in Helmand.

Comment

127. (S) This was a successful conference. The governors and the CoPs all recognize and agree on the seriousness of the threat posed by the Taliban (and narco-traffickers), and the need to keep up operations against them over the winter.

128. (U) The governors also all realize that the government has not been successful so far in extending its influence out into the districts, which it needs to do in order to win the loyalty of its citizens.

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